



NEWS

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Kempthorne Assures American Samoa Leaders of Interior's Commitment to the Islands' Economic Development

PAGO PAGO, American Samoa – Amidst concerns that American Samoa is on the brink of a severe economic downturn, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne today signed a grant for more than \$188,000 to fund a workforce study designed to help the territory attract private sector investment.

On the sixth and final stop on his visit to U.S.-affiliated Pacific island communities, Kempthorne met with Governor Togiola Tulafono and other political and traditional leaders to address concerns about the long-term viability of tuna canneries that employ about one-third of American Samoa's workforce.

Local leaders, including Togiola, Lieutenant Governor Ipulasi Aitofele Sunia, Senate President Lolo Moliga, and House Speaker Savali Talavou Ale, expressed to Secretary Kempthorne their concern that recently passed federal minimum wage legislation would force the canneries to relocate to countries that pay their workers a fraction of what workers earn in American Samoa.

"I listened to American Samoa's local leaders and understand that an exodus of the canneries would be devastating," said Kempthorne, who toured a cannery operated by StarKist. "In the long run, the Department of the Interior will work to help American Samoa diversify its economy into areas that can support higher wage jobs. The grant I signed here in American Samoa is part of that effort."

The study will help American Samoa and private investors determine whether there is a sufficient number of qualified employees on the island to support a call center industry or other industries. In addition, the study will identify the potential availability of workers from the Independent State of Samoa and other areas if necessary.

"American Samoa has lost more of its fine young men and women per capita in Iraq and Afghanistan than any state or any other territory," Kempthorne said. "This territory has earned the right to have its legitimate concerns duly considered in Washington, D.C."

During a traditional ava ceremony in Pago Pago, Kempthorne was bestowed with the high chiefly title of “Pulele’i’ite.” The title, which means “ruler who foresees the future,” derives from Manu’a, American Samoa’s outer island chain.

Kempthorne is accompanied by BJ Penn, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Installations and Environment; Donald Schregardus, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Environment; and Papali’i David Cohen, Interior’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs.

Additionally, Kempthorne visited American Samoa’s National Park, the only U.S. National Park in the Southern Hemisphere and one of only two in a tropical rainforest environment. Kempthorne attended a luncheon meeting where he took questions from various government and traditional leaders. Kempthorne also addressed a convention of nurses from throughout the U.S.-affiliated Pacific island communities and discussed the tens of millions of dollars that the Department of the Interior, through the Office of Insular Affairs, provides each year to support health care in the islands.

In addition to American Samoa, Kempthorne’s official visit to U.S.-affiliated Pacific island communities included Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, both U.S. territories, and the freely associated states of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau.

As Secretary of the Interior, Kempthorne is responsible for generally administering the Federal Government’s relationship with the U.S. territories (other than Puerto Rico) and administering the financial assistance provided to the freely associated states under the Compacts of Free Association.

American Samoa consists principally of five volcanic islands and two coral atolls (a total of 76.2 square miles). It is located about 2,300 miles southwest of Hawaii and about 2,700 miles northeast of Australia. The largest and most populated island is Tutuila, on which are located the territory's historic capital (Pago Pago), the seat of its legislature and judiciary (Fagatogo) and the office of the Governor (Utulei).

Unless having at birth at least one U.S. citizen national parent, an individual born in American Samoa is born a U.S. non-citizen national, who, like a U.S. citizen national, owes permanent allegiance to the United States. Many non-citizen nationals, after service in the U.S. military or upon moving to Hawaii or the U.S. mainland, have become naturalized American citizens. The population -- about 57,000, most of whom are ethnic Samoans -- has increased despite a large out-migration of Samoans to the United States. (The continuous out-migration trend has averaged about 382 migrants per year since 1974). It is estimated that 15,000 Samoans reside in Hawaii; 32,000 in California; and about 4,000 in Washington